The Heaven of Animals

by David James Poissant

Dan Lawson had made the trip before. After he discovered that his boy, Jack, was gay and threw him through a family-room window, after Dan's family left him, after he got sober and worked for years at redeeming himself in the eyes of his son—the language of regret transformed to checks that covered Jack's college tuition—he'd made the trip. Jack had taken a degree in marine biology, then a position researching ocean life on the Pacific coast. Dan had rented a moving van, and, towing Jack's car, they'd driven the three long days to California. Now, ten years later, he would make the trip alone.

That afternoon, Jack had called from La Jolla to say he'd be dead any day now. Someone was with him, but what he really wanted was Dan at his side, and could he maybe come, and soon?

The phone shook in Dan's hand like a live fish. His thoughts hurtled toward cancer, the scourge that had ravaged his parents, pushed friends into early graves, and, finally, taken the life of Lynn, his ex-wife and Jack's mother, a woman who, like her son, had been, if not too good for this world, then too good, certainly, for Dan.

But the problem wasn't cancer.

"I've got a pretty bad case of pneumonia," Jack said. His voice was raspy, unrecognizable. He paused between sentences to catch his breath.

"I don't understand," Dan said. He imagined the worst, and Jack raced to meet him there.

Jack said, "I've got a pretty bad case of AIDS." He told Dan about the hospitals. He told him about the drugs that had kept him alive for years and might have given him more, many more, had he not waited so long to seek treatment.

"I'm not the first to think if I ignored it, it would go away," he said. "I've killed men. I know I have. What I've done is unforgivable."

For years, Jack said, he'd suspected and been afraid to act until Marcus, a friend, had guessed and made him get tested. "The body's bad at keeping secrets," Jack said. "This disease, it tattoos its name on you in bruises."

He had traced the illness back to his high school history teacher. He'd been eighteen, impressionable, and the man had taught him everything but responsibility. Now, fifteen years later, the disease had run its course.

The line was quiet, and Dan fought to fill up the silence. "I'm sorry," he said.

Three days a week, Jack said, Marcus collapsed his wheelchair into the back of his car, drove him the half hour to San Diego, and wheeled him into a hospital where a technician waited to ease a needle between his ribs and pull pints of fluid from his lungs. But Jack had had enough of that. He would keep going only if Dan would come, after which he looked forward to drowning quietly in his sleep. He apologized for the morbidity of the confession, but not its directness.

Dan couldn't speak. He felt untethered. He held on to the phone, tight, as though to let go might cause him to float away.

Jack said, "I understand that I'm asking you to come to terms in minutes with something I've been coming to terms with for years."

That word, *years*. Dan winced to hear it. He brought a hand to his forehead, which was damp.

Not so long ago, he'd helped Jack set up his office and move into the house in La Jolla. Impossible that a decade could pass, *like that,* without visit or invitation.

Jack was silent for so long, Dan worried the line had gone dead.

"I'm here," Jack said.

How extraordinary to think that—together, crossing the country—the virus had been with them even then, that already it had made a nest in Jack's guts without their knowing. How long, then, had Jack known? How long had he known and said nothing? And, if he had said, would Dan have moved to be near him? What did fathers *do*?

He would have tried harder, that at least.

"I have to go," Jack said, and, before Dan could protest, he was gone.

That night, Dan left his house and crossed the highway and walked down to the familiar shoreline. He watched the still, cold waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Two men sat on the beach. One chopped up a bonito for bait. The silver fish came apart in fat, red chunks, and the sand bloomed pink beneath it. The other man baited three-pronged, baseball-sized hooks with the flesh and cast the bait as far as he could into the surf. The men had rigged four poles in stands in the sand.

Jack was no fisherman. Dan had taken him once, but the boy had cried at the first catch. He worried over the fish's welfare, the silver hook caught in the jaw. Standing beside the livewell, looking in, he'd wept until Dan dipped a hand in, caught the fish by its middle, and returned it to the water.

Jack would grow up that way, sensitive, in love with the world above water and below. Later, those rare times they spoke on the phone, their conversations circled back, inevitably, to Jack's work, his study of an endangered species or his latest tide pool discovery. Jack's favorites were the seals that watched him work. He spoke of them often, their playfulness, their curiosity, how, on a hot day, they blanketed the rocks and basked. *Like marble,* he'd said once, *like stones curled over stones.* And, from his chair, elbows propped on a kitchen table twenty-five hundred miles away, Dan had seen them, the animals and the rocks, the sight startling him, like a drawer flung open to an intimacy of spoons.

On the beach, a fishing rod bowed. Dan moved closer. The man with the rod dug his heels in the sand. The line unraveled in

a *whir*. The second man hurried across the beach, pulling in the other lines. "Black tip?" the man called.

"Bigger," the other said. The spinner screamed as the shark pulled more and more line. If it didn't tire, Dan knew, the line would run out and release, the shark swimming away, a mile of filament tracing its wake.

But the line did not run out. The hum subsided into the steady crank of the reel.

Dan imagined the men landing a ten-foot bull shark, the beast silvered by moonlight, thrashing the sand.

He didn't stay to see it. Instead, he walked down the beach to a bar and ordered a scotch, neat. He stared at the tumbler a long time. The drink would be his first in . . . forever, since the day he'd stood, drunk and disbelieving, in the glassy flowerbed over the body of his son, Lynn screaming for the other boy to call 911.

His deepest grief. His greatest shame. An act for which no conceivable penance existed. With the last tuition bill covered and Jack tucked away, far from his father as he could get, Dan had recognized that the thing he wanted most in the world was a thing he'd never have, and so he'd given up hope for forgiveness. A friend had suggested that perhaps Dan was already forgiven. That, by taking his money, begging his father's help, the boy had relented. Weren't these concessions of something like love? The idea was almost as believable as it was untrue. For Jack hadn't asked out of love. He'd asked out of necessity. The calls for help, when they came, were frantic. Jack had gotten into college but couldn't pay. He'd found work, but his ride had fallen through and he had to be in California by week's end. Dan was a last resort, always. He'd known this. He'd known and not cared, just as he knew that a decade of Christmas cards and the occasional phone call from California were born of nothing greater than a son's sense of obligation to his father.

Tonight, though. Tonight presented something new—a chance, final, but full with possibility. And just because forgiveness was a

thing he didn't deserve, that didn't make it a thing not worth chasing. Only the entirety of a country lay between them. He couldn't get back the lost years, but he could cross the country.

From a payphone at the bar, he called his son. "Of course I'll come. I'll leave in the morning, first thing," he said, and Jack thanked him and hung up.

Dan returned to the counter, paid, and passed the tumbler, still full, to the man on the stool beside him before walking up the beach and back home.

Near sunup he fell, at last, to sleep.

* * *

And woke late. He cursed himself, then cursed himself again when the car wouldn't start. The car was old and prone to breakdowns. It overheated. It stalled. It threw belts the way a dog shakes off water.

He checked the starter, then, relieved, moved to the shed. He pulled a battery down from its shelf. The battery was new, stolen from the garage. The job had never paid well, but the work was easy. He changed oil mostly, a simple service for which people handed over startling sums in the name of clean hands. The garage kept poor track of inventory, and, over the years, he'd lifted parts and merchandise to the tune of several thousand dollars.

He'd called Steve that morning to say he'd be gone awhile, maybe weeks. "Not if you want a job when you get back," Steve said, and Dan said that Steve could go fuck himself. He wouldn't sit around St. Pete's rotating tires while his boy lay dying on the other side of the country.

He wasn't really mad at Steve. Steve hadn't known he had a son. Few people did. Already, he felt the hand on his shoulder, Steve's apology upon his return. For days, the men would work in respectful silence, then, gradually, at break or in the pit, the jokes would sneak back in, the elbow nudges, talk of women and how best to get them into bed. Steve would be the last to forget. He

might say, "If you ever want to talk about it," and both men would understand that those were just words.

Midmorning, the car cranked and Dan left town. In his trunk, he carried oil filters, belts, another battery, talismans against any force that might impede his progress. By noon, he'd traded I-75 for I-10, the interstate that would carry him west, a straight shot through six states, until, north of Tucson, he took I-8. He'd follow the signs to San Diego, then head north to La Jolla. He wouldn't need a map. He knew the drive as though he'd made it not a decade, but a day, before.

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The bridge was rust-colored and seemed to shudder beneath him. Beyond the bridge, a sign announced the state line, and the sun sank into the highway. He was suspended: Below him, the Pearl River churned, muddy as chocolate milk. Above, the sky squatted, pink and orange, the color pulled east across the blue, as though smudged by a thumb.

He crossed the water and pulled his car to the side of the road. He had not stopped in hours, and his sides ached with soda. He followed a path through tall grass and down a steep embankment to the water's edge. Cars flew overhead. Trucks roared. He unzipped and pissed into the Pearl. The current surprised him, the water rushing by, filmy, its surface like burnt plastic.

Downstream, a boy sat beneath the bridge, watching him. Embarrassed, Dan zipped up and walked over. The boy was young, seven or eight, his face black, his mouth drawn in a frown. He sat on an overturned plastic bucket and held a cane pole in his hands. A line ran from the tip of the pole to the water. A blue length of nylon ran from a loop at the boy's ankle and into the river. At the end of the blue line, the silver sides of a few small fish spun in the current. The boy wore dirty jeans, cuffed at the knee, and a torn white T-shirt. Across its front, in tall black letters, the shirt read: THE END IS NEAR.

"Sir," the boy said, "you just peed on my fish."

"I didn't see you," Dan said. "I'm sorry."

The boy watched him, then the water. Dan didn't know where they stood, whether the boy had accepted his apology. The river rolled by.

"Here," he said. He pulled his wallet from his pocket and a five-dollar bill from the wallet. The boy scrunched up his face.

"Man," he said, "what do I look like to you?"

Dan shook his head. He returned the money and the wallet to his pocket. The shoreline held a rind of foam. He nudged the foam with his tan work boot's toe. A chunk let go and floated away.

And then the boy was up. The pole's tip disappeared into the water. He turned the pole in his hands, winding the line around the cane. Something large splashed at the water's edge, a flash of gills.

The fish followed the cane up and out of the water and landed, flopping, on the bank. The boy straddled the fish, pulled the hook from its mouth, then stood and held it out. It was a bass, a largemouth, five or six pounds, big and gleaming. Its dorsal fin unfolded, webbed, against the sky, and its stomach hung, white and distended, between the boy's hands. It was a beautiful catch.

Dan reached forward. He meant only to trace the fish's side, to run a finger along the signature pinstripe, eye to tail—to feel the cool, smooth slime. But at his hand's approach, the boy pulled the fish back. Without a word, he dropped it into the river. The fish hit the surface with a terrific smack and was gone.

The boy waded into the water, and the river made wishbones around his ankles. His small catches darted, pulling futilely at their tether. He bent and let the current run over his hands, then dried his palms on the seat of his pants.

"Why?" Dan asked.

"Sow," he said. "Belly full of eggs."

Dan stared at the boy, his worn clothes, his gaunt face. Ribs hugged his stomach on either side.

Dan said, "But you're fishing for food."

"I throw her back now, next year there'll be more fish to catch."

The boy returned to the shore, knelt, and unfastened the stringer from his leg. He righted his bucket and dropped the line of fish into it. A few flapped their protest against the bucket's dry bottom. The boy stood and, with bucket and pole, made his way up the hill toward the highway. Dan followed. He wished suddenly that Jack could meet this kid. He would have admired the boy, his sense of—what was it—*ecology*? No, it was more than that, a kind of animal morality. He still couldn't believe it. The boy had thrown the fish back.

"What does it mean?" he asked. "Your shirt?"

The boy walked on but stopped at the top of the hill. Behind him, cars raced into Louisiana.

"*The end is near,*" Dan said. "What does that mean?"

The boy looked confused. "It means what it says," he said.

"You mean, like biblically. Like the apocalypse?"

The boy shrugged. "I seen Him," he said. "Sometimes, when I'm under the bridge, I look up and He's coming over the water, walking just like you or me."

Dan waited for more. He watched the river, but he couldn't see it. He couldn't imagine a man, anybody, crossing the water, not the way he could when he closed his eyes and saw Jack's seals.

When he turned, the boy was already up the road. Dan watched until he was a speck against the sun. Then the sun dipped below the horizon, and the boy followed.

* * *

Passing through Baton Rouge, Dan thought of the night when, miraculously, Jack was a voice on the phone. It had been five years, and Jack was finished at LSU. He had his degree and, now, a job. His voice was no longer a boy's, and Dan's heart broke to hear it.

They met at a restaurant near campus. Jack did not hug him, but stepped forward and shook his hand. Dan had braced himself for anything. He'd expected someone meek, effeminate, the teenage

Jack, who, for a time, Dan had forgotten how to love. But this Jack was tall and muscled, with a tanned face and copper-colored arms. He had a good, strong chin that reminded Dan of his own. He wore a sensible haircut.

Still, some things set Jack apart. Not the way he talked or dressed, not exactly, but a hiccup in his step, or the way his arms hung at his sides, or his habit of bringing one hand to his face when he spoke. He ordered a meal off the menu that would have been Dan's last choice, and, in conversation, used words at whose meanings Dan could only guess. He was changed—Dan couldn't say whether for the better—and their trip began like a foot, the truck's cramped cab a new boot, the men pressed like toes, close, each too close to the other.

The first day, they didn't speak. They listened to the radio and took turns at the wheel. At each stop, Dan checked the hitch that joined Jack's car to the back of the van. At a Texas motel, they took separate rooms. The second day, though, Jack told Dan about his studies and Dan discussed work at the garage, and that night they shared a room. By the third day's end, navigating the mountains of Southern California, the boot's leather had stretched, and they flexed, they laughed, breathed easy. Jack even asked Dan's advice on taxes and car repair.

They hit the ocean too soon. Dan didn't want the trip to be over. He didn't want to say goodbye. But he was not asked to stay. So, the next day, with Jack's belongings secured and the moving van returned, Dan stepped onto a plane. Had he been asked, right then, when he'd see his son again, he'd have said *soon*. But *soon* had turned to ten years, and Dan couldn't explain it.

He might, in those rarest, most honest of moments, have confessed that he'd been afraid, scared of what closeness required—an acknowledgment of boyfriends, of lovers, of a life he didn't want for his son. He'd wanted to appreciate Jack's *other* qualities, the kind heart, the elegant mind. But there were so many aspects of Jack to contend with, so many Jacks: the Jack who was gay and

the Jacks who made up his son—the baby in the cradle; the toddler crouched, laughing, beneath the kitchen sink; the boy on the lawn—sunshine and the haze the sprinklers made, the water a mist, then steam, before it hit the ground—and Dan could not reconcile the one with the rest.

He'd hoped to learn, in time, to take Jack as he was, to not have to cut phone calls short, afraid of what he might hear, or who—a voice in the background or a man on the line, listening in.

He'd hoped to learn, in time, been certain there was time, always more time.

He drove on, past billboard-strewn Baton Rouge, across a wing of the Mississippi wide as memory, through Lafayette, past green fields and black swamps, and on, and on, toward Texas.

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Late in the day, he reached the rest stop outside Lake Charles. They'd taken their first break here. Jack stepped out of the van, stretched, and his spine marked his shirt like links in a chain. The hem lifted, and Jack's back was as dark as his arms. His was the skin of a man who spent his days not under cars, but on boats and knee-deep in waterways, bent to net specimens. Dan felt something at the sight of it, a pain, dull and deep, and another seeing the hairs—light, feathery—that traversed the hollow where back met waist. The fall from the window had broken Jack's arm, and the hairs had come out of the cast curly, elbow to wrist, a living nest.

Dan counted his cash. The first trip, business had been better, gas cheaper. He'd have to be careful. He had no savings to fall back on—nothing but the house and the car, both so far gone as to be of no real value. He bought two bags of chips from a vending machine, ate them leaning against the car, then found a phone booth, the old-fashioned kind with windows and a door that closed.

The man named Marcus answered the phone.

"How is he?" Dan asked.

"He's sleeping," Marcus said, and his voice was like hot gravel pressed to a fresh road. "Today wasn't terrible. But every day is different. Each day's a surprise."

Dan asked whether he was in a lot of pain, and Marcus said that he was.

"But he won't show it," he said. "He's being brave. He won't take the morphine."

Dan understood what Marcus meant, that Jack was waiting for him, that Jack needed him there faster, needed him now.

And how would Jack look when he saw him? He pictured a skeleton, bones draped in bedsheets, eyes swollen in their sockets, yellow as yolks.

"Make sure he eats," Dan said, and Marcus said, "You don't know what you're talking about. Food means nothing. We're way past food."

The man on the phone was not on Dan's side. He was dangerous, but he was all Dan had. He was the one keeping Jack alive, and so Dan would have to be careful.

"Just tell me when you'll be here and how I can reach you," Marcus said.

Dan promised to be there in two days. He would call along the way, whenever he stopped, wherever he found a payphone.

He thought Marcus was coughing before he knew he was laughing.

"Hello to the twenty-first century," Marcus said. "Cell phones and airplanes. These are not new things." And then Dan heard a screech, and then a recorded voice. The voice asked him to deposit more money. He patted his pockets for coins, then hung up.

Back behind the wheel, he considered pulling away, driving all night and the rest of the following day. He had come nine hundred miles. He still had far to go. He'd need caffeine, lots of it, or he could try to score a few turnarounds at a truck stop. He shut his eyes. The headrest was warm on his neck. He could almost

see Jack beyond the windshield, stretching, stretching, his fingers tangled in sunlight, ready for takeoff.

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Raindrops came through the open window and pelted his shoulder. It was early, still dark. Dan rolled up the window, then ran through the rain to the restrooms. He stood beneath an overhang, watching the water come down. He dreaded the day ahead, the monotony of the road, the tiny gas stations and blank faces of the men and women who worked the registers. And he was afraid. He feared that his tires, leather-smooth, would run off the road. He feared that the wipers, which rattled and slapped even in light rain, would seize and leave him blind in the downpour. And the one true fear, what all the other fears suggested: that he might not reach Jack in time.

Today, he would have to drive faster, go farther, and he did, until the silver smolder of the diner on the hill compelled him to exit. No cars filled the spaces in front of the diner, but a blue neon sign in the window glowed OPEN.

The diner was smaller than he remembered. They'd stopped here the first night, before finding a place to sleep. A gas station, long boarded up, stood in the adjacent lot. The vast absence of anything else extended as far as he could see.

Inside, Dan took a seat at the counter. Across the empty diner was the booth where they'd sat, Jack stacking sugar packets into towers until the food came. When they left, Jack said he'd forgotten something and ran back in. Then, through the window, Dan watched his son add a few bills to the tip he'd left, an embarrassment that made him feel cheap, accused. He wished Jack had just come out and said it. But Jack was not his father's son. Given discretion and confrontation, Jack would always choose discretion. Between these, Dan imagined a third way to be, but neither of them had ever been good at in-between, each already too much himself.

Through an opening in the wall, Dan could see into the kitchen. A man in a paper hat stood at the grill. He pressed bacon with a steel spatula. Before he'd learned cars, Dan had done this work. He came home nights stinking of lard and lemon-scented cleaner. Now, most days, he smelled of grease and gasoline, which was okay. Garage smells didn't bother him the way the restaurant had, how the food stink clung to your clothes, how it combed itself into your hair.

"Annie will be with you in a minute," the man said, without looking up.

Dan pulled a yellow menu from a greasy rack fastened to the laminate countertop. The menu was the kind with pictures in place of descriptions. Grainy photographs advertised the Hungry Man Breakfast, the Lumberjack Special, and the Ultimate Combo. The Ultimate Combo was pancakes, toast, potatoes, eggs, and a mess of meats. He was hungry enough to eat it all.

"It's a lot of food," she said.

Annie was short and wide around the middle. She wore a blue-and-white getup and an apron, as though she belonged not here, but in a diner from Dan's youth. Her hair, blond, then brown where the roots reached out, was brushed forward in a stiff wave over her forehead. The rest fell in curls that settled on her shoulders. The bridge of her nose was wide, but her skin was smooth and unblemished, her mouth small and red. Her eyes were blue pools, and her face narrowed from a high forehead to a point of chin, like an egg balanced on its tapered end. Jack had shown him that, how to balance an egg, how it wasn't something you could do only on the equinox the way people said.

She set a napkin in front of him, then weighted it with silverware. "Coffee?"

"Please," he said. He could order the enormous meal, but a meal took time. Jack would never know, but that thought, the not knowing, brought Dan no comfort.

"And toast," he said.

"Just toast?" Annie asked.

He nodded. Her features, in spite of them, or because of them, their strange assemblage, all of them added up to something he didn't want to admit.

Her eyes didn't leave his, and how much time had passed since he'd been with a woman? But she was no woman. She was no older than Jack the day Dan had found him in the other boy's arms. Children, all of them.

He looked away. He coughed. He pressed his longing into a ball, returned his menu to the rack with a slap, and, with this act, jettisoned his desire—that small, round ache—into the universe.

"Just toast," Annie called to the man in the paper hat.

The man grunted and shook his head.

Annie produced a mug from under the counter and filled it with coffee from a plastic-handled pot. She watched him with an intensity he missed from the years before he married. The way he looked now, his face, people gave him room in a crowd. Maybe it was the missing tooth. Maybe it was the scar that ran eyebrow to ear, or the sky that filled up an absence of earlobe. Souvenirs of his drinking days and of the fights and dares that accompanied those days. But, returning the coffeepot to its warmer, offering him a plate of toast, Annie didn't look afraid.

She smiled. "Anything else?"

"No," he said. "Thank you."

She tore a ticket from her pad and tucked it under his mug, then turned and busied herself with the coffeemaker. Her apron strings were tied in a bow at eye level. He tried not to stare. He ate quickly, guzzled his coffee, and left a five on the counter. He'd hit the bathroom, and then he'd be gone.

But, standing at the urinal, he wasn't alone long. He smelled her first, soda and maple syrup. The door opened behind him. It shut. A hand brushed his waist and took hold of him. He stiffened even as the last of the piss left him, and then she was pumping. The handle of her jaw found his shoulder, and he felt her heat, her

apron-front warm against the back of his pants, all of it happening fast, familiar as bad TV, practiced as pornography.

"Wait," he said, but she did not stop. Her hand found his hair, his head pulled back, teeth like bee stings down his neck. He spun, and she fell away.

He found her on the floor, face hidden by hair, her apron a twisted, knotted thing. She was trembling.

He didn't have time for this. He knelt and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he said.

The slap came hard. "Fuck you!" She screamed it. "Fucking pervert!"

Dan stood. He zipped up and buttoned the front of his pants.

"Molester!"

A crash echoed from the kitchen, and Dan knew what came next. Already he felt the policeman's hand on his head, the firm push into the back of the car. And how to explain this to Jack? His absence, it would be unforgivable as the window. It would be worse.

The screams kept coming. She kicked and squirmed.

"If I miss this," he said, but he didn't bother with the rest. He'd fought many men, knocked some unconscious, fucked up his fist with the snap of another man's nose. He'd never so much as pushed a woman. This girl, though—he could see himself doing things. Her foot caught his shin, and, right then, he wanted to take her head between his hands and lift her from the floor, wanted to squeeze until the screaming stopped.

"Heaven help you," he said. "Heaven help you if I don't make it out of here."

His words, and the thing that thickened his words, turned Annie's shouts to whimpers. Wide-eyed, she watched him.

Dan moved away from the door. He felt sorry for the guy, but he knew what this looked like, knew no explanation would suffice. He planted his feet. He'd get one chance at this.

The door flew open, and he threw the punch with everything he had in him. His arm was a rocket. It was a battering ram hammering the castle door. Splinters. His fist found face, something cracked, and the man was down. Annie didn't scream. She didn't move. The cook was out, his paper hat crumpled beneath him.

He stepped over the body. He didn't look back at Annie. He moved quickly from the restaurant and into the rain. In the rearview mirror, though, pulling away, he could have sworn he caught a glimpse of the girl's face at the window, mouth open, and he couldn't tell which it was, whether she cursed him or called him back.

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Texas was a bastard, the road unraveling in a graphite blanket of forever. Blue sky had strangled the rain, and now steam rose in waves from the asphalt, the landscape blurred in a chemical spill of browns and reds. He passed derricks that bobbed like birds drilling the earth for food. He passed something dead and fly-covered on the side of the road, belly full of wings where buzzards crouched, heads burrowed in the carcass.

The afternoon brought with it the kind of heat that clogs your head and slows your thinking. He adjusted the air-conditioning to half-blast, afraid for the car and the overheating that could leave him thirty miles or more between gas stations. The radio was fuzz, and he drove long stretches without passing another car or truck. He was all over the road. He fought sleep. On this stretch, he and Jack had traded seats often and talked to keep each other awake.

He wondered whether Jack had made the fish up.

"I won't go back," Jack had said. "I mean, the project was funded, and I was in the Amazon, so I can't complain. But, Jesus, the number of things down there that can kill you. They have these eels, enough volts to knock down a grown man. They have stingrays, of course, and caimans, plus the catfish."

"How big?" Dan asked.

"Big enough that children go missing."

He pictured it, whiskers thick as garden hoses, the mouth pried open and the body inside.

"How about piranhas?"

"Well, sure." Jack smiled. He laced his fingers across his lap. "Really, though, their reputation overwhelms them. File them under 'Misunderstood.' They're like sharks. No open wound, you've probably got nothing to worry about."

"I'll keep that in mind," Dan said, "next time I visit the Amazon."

Jack nodded. He was waiting to talk. Dan knew Jack didn't hear half of what he said, and he didn't care. A week before, he wouldn't have believed he'd be crossing the country with his son at his side.

"What trumps them all," Jack said, "is this parasitic fish, an inch long. What it does is it slips between the gills of a bigger fish and eats its host from the inside out. Only, these fish, sometimes they swim into people—ears, anus, whatever orifice they find first. This guy I know, Toby, the thing wriggled up his dick and ate the urethra."

Later, Dan would blame the heat. But it was the fish, the idea, that forced him to the side of the road to dry-heave out the open door. In the van, Jack howled and slapped the dash.

All those years, and Dan couldn't shake it. At times, the thought snuck up on him, scaring him with its forcefulness, and he felt the fish inside him, not eating, but struggling to rip free.

Out his window, Dan watched distant mountains rise and fall. I-10 hugged the border with Mexico, and beyond this invisible line, the mountains scraped the sky for miles. The day was ending, and the land beneath him unflattened, road surrendering to dips and bends, channels of orange and red rock. Scarred cliffs marked the places dynamite had met the mountains and made way for the road. The rock rose in walls around him, earth—millions of years of it—etched in ribbons of sediment.

Another hundred miles, and he'd put Texas behind him. He drove on, fighting the fish the whole way. The sensation, when it came, rose, gut to throat, twisting, an ember in a fire, then lifting like ash.

♦ ♦ ♦

New Mexico welcomed Dan into exhaustion. Night had come. He drove until he could no longer keep awake for the next exit, then pulled the car onto the shoulder of the road. The desert lay beyond, a wide-open expanse of sand and sage, and he drove into it. He navigated past a boulder, past a clump of prickly pear, hands like paddles in the headlights, and brought the car to rest behind a tower of rocks where he hoped he wouldn't be bothered. He drained his last jug of water. He had a bag of beef jerky from an earlier stop, and he finished that too. At a BP, he'd meant to call Jack but found the payphone's receiver missing, the cord frayed as though chewed through by an animal. He would have to wait until morning.

He wanted sleep, but the heat and the car were suffocating, so he climbed onto the roof. He imagined the morning, snakes in his boots, and left them on. But his shirt he pulled off for a pillow. He lay back and let his legs hang over the windshield, heels on the hood. Above him, stars spilled out of a white rip in the night. A coyote called and was answered by another. A breeze swept his chest like the palm of a hand.

His eyes burned. He was going to make it. Against all odds—the car, the rain, the fight at the diner that might have left him in jail—he would reach his boy. Gulf coast to Pacific in three days.

Son, he thought, *stay. Stay and wait for me.*

♦ ♦ ♦

The morning was an orange, peeled and held fast in a fist, pulpy and hot. Dan cursed again and kicked a tire. The car should not have broken down. He'd tended to it the whole trip, monitoring

fluid levels, topping off the gas tank, keeping the air low and the coolant full. It should not have broken down, but it had.

He'd woken at first light, freezing, and hit the road. At a gas station, he'd stocked up on food and water, changed his clothes in the bathroom, and driven on. The day warmed. The earth around him turned brown. The bushes were scorched, the landscape flat, calm like the surface of a sea. Ahead, the asphalt split the sea, an unbending avenue of black.

Half of New Mexico was behind him when the car first steamed and shook. An exit came into view. He took it and pulled into an Amoco station in time for the car to gasp and die with an unceremonious shudder. He waited an hour to add coolant and still the tank blew like a geyser when the cap came off. Antifreeze gushed green, bubbled and puddled on the ground where the thirsty air licked the pavement dry in seconds. An old man stood at the window inside the Amoco. He shook his head, and Dan hated him. He knew what the man was thinking, but Dan knew all about cars, knew this car better than any he'd owned. He just hadn't known what *heat* was, not really. His trip with Jack had been in May. But this was July, and one of the hottest summers on record, or so said the people on the radio. A few locals looked on from the shade of the awning that overhung the gas pumps.

"You let it cool down?" a boy called.

Dan shot him a look that could cleave meat. The boy looked away.

Hours passed, and the car would not cool down. Then, when the car did cool down, it wouldn't start, and Dan knew that his problem was that most delicate, most temperamental of instruments: the transmission. Only the smallest part needed to break off and cycle through to make a mess of your machine. At the garage, they called it *sudden catastrophic failure.* This was their way of saying: *Get ready to fork over thousands, you're fucked.*

In the distance, over vacancies of brown, an honest to God tumbleweed cruised by.

The car would not be repaired, not with the money he had or in time to reach Jack. He would have to find a new way. Whatever happened, his trip couldn't end like this, Dan stranded two states away. He'd come too far. He was too close.

He found the payphone beside the building, a steel box lashed to a cement pole that was planted between two restroom doors. Over the blue-and-white women's symbol, someone had carved CUNT. Over this, someone had scribbled the crude outline of a dick in black marker. It shot a thin, dark stream up the door.

To Dan's surprise, Jack picked up the phone.

"Marcus says you'll be here tonight," Jack said.

"That's the plan," Dan said. "How are you?"

"Dying," Jack said, "*still.*" Jack laughed, but the laugh was thin, almost a croak. Then Dan heard a voice in the background and the rustle of Jack resting the phone in his lap. They argued, and, when Jack returned, he sounded anxious.

"He wants to know when," Jack said.

"Soon," Dan said.

"Soon or *soon*?"

Dan said nothing. Jack wanted a promise he wasn't sure he could keep. A phonebook lay open on the ground. He nudged it with the toe of his boot. Its pages stood stiff, wavy in space, as though bronzed.

On the line, more argument, then Jack yelled, "He's coming, all right? Go away." A door slammed, and Jack apologized.

Across the parking lot, a tan Honda Civic pulled up to the pumps, a 2007, Dan guessed. A girl got out and walked into the station.

"Things okay there?" Dan said, but Jack didn't hear or didn't want to talk about it. What he said next surprised Dan, the past rushing at him like a wall of water over the desert floor.

"That winter," Jack said, "in the Florida house. All those sounds coming through the ceiling. You remember?"

"You couldn't sleep," Dan said. "You thought they were monsters."

"Remember what you told me?" Jack said. "To make me sleep?"

"I don't," Dan said. He did but wanted to hear his son say it.

"Angels," Jack said. "Angels in the attic."

He'd meant only to comfort the child. An invention, like the idea of a heaven for animals, a consolation to make easier the death of the family dog.

Jack's voice sharpened. "Ten years old, and I believed you. And I wanted to see them. I thought they'd be so beautiful. But I was afraid to go up. Until the noise stopped and the stink started. One night, I got brave. I pulled the cord and climbed the ladder, and you know what I found? *Squirrels*. Dead fucking *squirrels* all over the place."

Dan remembered it well. He'd poisoned them, then collected the dead into a garbage bag, tails stiff as handles, eyes glazed in a way that filled his dreams for weeks.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean for you to—" But already Jack was speaking again.

"No," he said. "What I'm saying is, they're *here*, the angels. They weren't there, but they're here, now, in this house. I see them. Before I fall asleep, they fill up the ceiling."

Dan felt suddenly sick. He wondered whether Marcus had started the morphine, whether a fever had sunk its teeth into Jack's brain. Before his own father died, he'd claimed a troll crawled out each night from under the hospital bed to gnaw on his toes. The dying suffered delusions, Dan knew this. Still, he was sorry Jack saw things that weren't there. He wanted Jack still in the world when he arrived, awake and clearheaded. Maybe he was selfish to want it, but, when he knelt at Jack's side, he wanted his son to know who he was.

Jack was silent a long time before he said, "Dad?"

The word had not found his ear in fifteen years, and Dan trembled to hear it.

"Dad, am I going crazy?"

"No," Dan said. "No, you're just fine."

"Then, they're there, what I see?" Jack's voice, it had turned to a boy's.

"They're there," Dan said. His throat ached.

"And they won't leave?"

"They won't leave."

"Good," Jack said. "I don't want them to leave."

"They won't," Dan said, "I'll make sure of it." And he hoped he was not mistaken. Because the angels, if they went away, would be his fault. He'd brought them into the world, into his son's imagination, yet he couldn't control what became of them. And, should they vanish, what then? What chance then at Jack's forgiveness?

"Promise not to tell Marcus," Jack said.

Dan promised, and the promise warmed him with what the other man didn't know. Dan was trusted. Whatever the other man was to Jack, he wasn't his father, wasn't the one in whom the son placed his confidence at the end. He promised again, but Jack had already said goodbye, his words cut off with a click.

Time. The enemy had always been *time*. He walked past the Honda, dust-covered, waiting, and saw the thing he'd hoped for. He didn't want to do it, but he had no choice, could think of no other way. Buses, taxis, these took money. Hitchhiking wasn't new to him, but the travel was unpredictable, slow. He hurried to his car. He'd packed one bag. He pulled it from the backseat and walked, calm as he could, to the Honda. Beside the car, hoses hung from their pump, a trio of elephant trunks, wrinkled, their middles cinched by metal rings. And, through the open window, a rabbit's foot. It dangled like life from the chain, the chain from the key, the key snug in the ignition, a gift. Dan opened the door to California.

* * *

Except that he'd forgotten about the checkpoint.

He'd been sailing along, the car handling like a dream. He didn't have to fight the wheel to stay in his lane. He didn't have to squint past a bug-cluttered windshield. He'd driven the other

so long, he'd forgotten what a car felt like less than ten years old, sixty thousand miles on the odometer.

And then the building was upon him, low on the horizon, its tower screaming several stories into the sky. It straddled the interstate, an upturned tuning fork. The station was there to weed out illegals, but Dan didn't doubt that stolen cars rode the Border Patrol bandwidth. And how quickly were tags called in? He'd had the car an hour. He could see no other roads, no way out. To turn here, make an about-face across the highway, guaranteed a cop on your ass in seconds. No choice but to kamikaze right into the thing.

The checkpoint was concrete, the roof blue, solar-paneled on either side of the watchtower. From the tower hung a huge and old-fashioned-looking searchlight. Along the building's front, red lights pulsed and signs ordered motorists to come to a complete stop. Ahead, orange cones funneled vehicles into two lanes. At the end of each lane, men in brown uniforms and black sunglasses either waved you on or directed you to the side of the road where more men in uniforms and sunglasses waited to interrogate you or peek into your trunk.

Cars took one lane, trucks another. He followed the car ahead of him, an eighties station wagon with whitewalls and wood paneling. His heart hammered in his chest. Then, without warning, everything went sideways. His last thought: *So this is what it's like, passing out.*

He woke to the rap at his window and rolled it down. He saw himself reflected in the sunglasses of the man. He tried not to appear frightened. The man was his age, his face like cracked leather. The hint of a mustache traced his upper lip, a few days' growth.

"Sir?" the man said. Beyond, cars pulled around them and rejoined the line ahead. Above, the sky shone, sun-bright and dizzying.

"Sir, are you all right?"

Dan felt hot all over. A bead of sweat rolled into one eye, but

he didn't move to wipe it. The steering wheel, his hands fixed to it—he was sure if he let go he'd be out again.

"Please put your vehicle in park, step out of the car, and come with me."

Dan followed the patrolman to a door on the side of the building. The door read NO ENTRY / NO ENTRAR.

The room was small, crowded with shelves full of folders and books bound by black spirals. The uniformed man sat in the only chair. He reached into a large cooler on the floor and handed Dan a bottle of water. He gestured toward the cooler, and Dan sat. He drank. The water and the room were warm. He drained the bottle and was offered another. He wasn't thirsty, but the drinking bought him time. He tried to think up answers to the questions that would come next—his daughter's car, married, different last name, business trip—but the possibilities were endless, and he quickly lost track of the story he meant to tell. In one corner, an electric fan buzzed. The breeze didn't make a dent in the heat.

"We see this all the time," the man said. Dan nodded. He wondered whether the cuffs would be metal, or whether they'd use the restraints he'd seen on TV, plastic ones that sounded like zippers fastening the wrists. Prison wouldn't be new to him. He'd done two months after Jack. He had not asked the boy to lie for him, and Jack hadn't. In the emergency room, the nurse asked what happened. Jack only shook his head, and Dan was led to a small, well-lit room. An hour later, an officer escorted him from the hospital and into his cruiser. Dan in the backseat, a metal screen between them, the cop said, "It's fuckers like you give dads a bad name. If you're not knocking the kid around, you're hitting the wife."

Dan had never hit Lynn, or Jack before that. But he didn't argue. The whiskey was wearing off, and he could see the trouble he was in. He'd been on a bender, a week or two by then, and the sight of it, stepping into the room, Jack's face pressed to the face of

the other boy, it had sent hot sparks up his spine. He'd regretted the reflex, regretted it before Jack went through the window, regretted it seeing his son still in air. He would have gone back, if he could, stopped time and stepped forward—the child suspended, aloft—would have cradled him, flown with him, dropped with him, broken the fall.

Dan sucked the water down.

"Everyday occurrence around here." The patrolman patted the cooler's side. "Reason we keep these around," he said, and Dan realized that the man didn't mean stolen cars but heatstroke, dehydration.

"One for the road," the patrolman said. He passed him another bottle. "You got A/C?"

"I do," Dan said.

"Use it."

Dan tried not to appear in a hurry. He cracked the new bottle and took a long pull. Air bubbled up in chugs. He lowered the bottle, balanced it on his knee. Finally, he held the bottle skyward, as though to offer a toast.

The gesture sent the patrolman to the door, and Dan followed the man into the heat. He nodded when he was told to *drive safe*, then pulled ahead to rejoin the line. At the checkpoint, they were no longer stopping cars. Everyone was waved through. He drove slow until the station disappeared from the rearview, then his foot hit the accelerator.

Sun sinking, the weight of what he'd done settled on him. Tracking him down would be easy. They had only to run the plates or the VIN from the car he'd left at the Amoco. Already, his name and face had likely joined a list of the wanted. His one chance: No way would they guess his direction. Back home, they'd have him, but that was all right. What he wanted, his investment in what was left of Jack's life, he'd have before heading home. Let them have him then. Locks, and throw away the key. So long as he saw his

son, so long as he got a chance at goodbye, he'd allow it: the trip back, and whatever came after.

* * *

Arizona loomed, a succession of boulder piles, of rocks that reached up and up, like arms, their shadows bent over the interstate, a playful, haunted geography. Catastrophe took only one rock to dislodge from its perch. Everywhere, signs warned of it, as though the driver could do anything in the face of bad luck.

He hit Benson past nightfall and recognized the exit he'd been looking for. He followed the signs to the parking lot and approached the motel. The building leaned, gingerbread-colored, one gust of wind away from falling over. A billboard boasted: BENSON INN: HOME OF TED, WORLD'S LARGEST GILA MONSTER!

A Gila monster really had been there, and it had been big. Black and pink in its beadwork, its face more toad than lizard, the animal had lain curled like a question mark on a slab of slate behind an aquarium's glass walls. Its tail was a tube, its jaw the curve of a soda can.

"Venomous," Jack said.

"I thought that was just snakes," Dan said, and Jack shook his head. Then, he surprised Dan. He moved to the desk and asked for a double. "To save money," Jack said. Dan nodded, but this was big, was about more than just money. They spent the night each in his own bed, each turned toward his wall, not a word past *goodnight*—but they were together, and Dan was awake a long time listening to the in-and-out of his boy's breath. Sometimes the breathing caught, followed by a thick, mucusy cough. Jack would stir, sigh, then fall back to sleep, and Dan would fight the urge to turn and look.

Inside, Dan found the lobby as he'd left it, as old and worn-out-looking as the woman who worked the front desk. The skin of her face hung in folds, and her chin begged plucking. Her hair, done up in gray waves, was wispy, thin as spider's silk. A tag fastened to her shirtfront read MARGARET in red, raised print.

He thought it was her, the woman who'd placed the key in his hand a decade before, but this seemed impossible, the kind of trick that comes when memory and hope collide. A row of incandescent bulbs flickered and hummed overhead. Paperback books crowded the counter. Dust coated the wide leaves of plastic plants in clay pots.

The woman named Margaret watched him a long time before she said, "Yes?"

"I'm here for Ted," he said. It was the wrong thing to say.

"We're no zoo," she said. "You want to see Ted, you have to stay the night."

He asked how much. Margaret sized him up, then looked past him to the car in the parking lot.

"Fifty," she said.

He opened his wallet. Five twenties lined the pocket. It was all the money he had left.

He offered forty. Margaret took the money and jerked her thumb at a cardboard box behind the counter. The box sat on a low table. Its corners had been reinforced with duct tape, and a pillowcase, sky blue with white stitching, lay draped where a lid should have been. He stepped past the counter and pulled the pillowcase away.

Inside, a lizard stretched from one corner of the box to the other. The creature was scaly and green, rib-thin. A ridge of black teeth traced its back like on a child's construction-paper cutout of a dragon. The sides of the box were crazy with claw marks, the bottom nothing but sand and a head of broccoli, wilted and gray.

This was not Ted. This was not even a Gila monster.

"This is an iguana," Dan said. He turned to face Margaret. She frowned, shrugged, scratched her side.

"What happened to Ted?"

"Park Service got him," she said. "I'm here thirty years and no one says a word. Next thing I know, this lady tells me I need a permit. Says Gila monsters are on the list. Not the endangered species

list, but, get this, the list that comes *before* that list. *Threatened,* she called it. She called Ted threatened and took him away. Said she'd see me shut down, but it was all hot air."

He waited for more, but Margaret seemed to have reached the end of the story.

"Smoking or non?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?" He couldn't understand it. The Gila monster, it should have been there to tell Jack about. "I saw Ted," he would say, and Jack, remembering, would laugh. "Remember the fish you told me about?" he'd say. "Remember the diner, the sugar packets, how you covered the table with pink and blue towers? I stopped there, too. And this boy I met by the Pearl River, I've got to tell you about him." He needed this, needed Ted there at the bottom of the box. But Ted wasn't there.

Something had gotten fucked up. Something had gotten tremendously fucked up this time around, and here he stood, stolen car in the parking lot and the wrong fucking animal at the bottom of the box.

"Your room," Margaret said. "You want smoking?"

The aquarium was cardboard, and the cover, when it fell away, had revealed nothing, no monster, only this green pet-store reject.

"Sir?" She'd almost yelled it. Her fingers drummed the desk.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I never meant to stay."

The woman scowled. "Well, don't think you're getting your money back."

"Keep the money," he said. "Just let me use your phone."

She eyed him, suspicious, then shrugged. "Dial nine to get out," she said, gesturing toward a tan phone on a corner table.

The earpiece, when it touched his face, was sticky, warm as though it had just left someone's ear. A square blinked red beside the buttons. He dialed nine, then Jack's number.

Marcus answered, and Dan made no excuses.

"I'll be there by morning," he said. "Please put Jack on the phone."

"Just be patient with him," Marcus said. "It's been a bad day."

But he didn't know what Marcus meant. Jack sounded terrific, the best he'd been since the first call came.

"They drained the left today," he said. "It's great—I can *breathe.*"

He waited for Jack to ask where he was. He was prepared to tell everything, to exaggerate or lie, whatever it took, only don't let Jack be mad at him. Except, Jack didn't ask. If he remembered Dan's promise to be there that night, he didn't mention it.

"I'm in Benson," he said. "Remember Ted?"

"Ted," Jack said.

"The Gila monster? The motel outside Tucson?"

Jack coughed.

"I'm making the trip," Dan said. "Just like we made it when you moved out there."

Jack said something, and Dan, sure he'd misheard, asked him to repeat it. Only, he'd heard right. Again, Jack said: "Mom?"

"I'm Dan," he said. "Your dad."

"Mom and me," Jack was saying, "we rented a truck this time and drove it cross-country and the lizard was there at this motel in a tank with a rock."

"Jack," he said, but how could he tell him? How did you tell someone politely that, at the time, his mother was already dead?

"And Mom asked if she could touch it!" Jack said. He laughed, choked, laughed again. "A venomous lizard! Can you believe it?"

"Son," he said. He needed Jack to remember because, if not this, what? What did they have? Nothing else, nothing shared, nothing from Jack's adulthood but the van, the stops, their words, three days.

"How *is* old Ted?" Jack said.

Across the room, Dan watched as the pillowcase was lowered over the box. The box rattled back. Margaret stepped away.

"Fine," Dan said. "Really just fine. He's got a new cage, a big one. Lots of room for him to run around."

"I'm glad," Jack said.

"You should see it," Dan said, and he had a wild thought. Maybe he could steal his son from the house, bring him here. Or, not here, because Ted was not here, but some right place, a place to make Jack happy. They could go to the beach, see Jack's seals. They'd have to lose Marcus, and he wasn't sure how that would go over. He'd have to see the man, size him up. On the phone, Marcus was someone not to be fucked with, but a man on the phone wasn't always the man in real life.

"I have to go now," Dan said. "I'll be there before you know it."

He heard static on the other end, a rustle, then Marcus, his voice a whisper.

"He's asleep," Marcus said.

"Just like that?"

"It's what happens."

Dan couldn't believe it. He imagined Jack muffled, the man's hand over his mouth. His son, thin, weak, flailed for the phone.

Marcus began to detail Jack's condition. He implored Dan to hurry.

Dan hung up.

His eyes burned. His stomach ached. Exhaustion foamed at the back of his brain, a bottle opened too soon after shaking. Already he'd bought the room. How easy it would be to check in, to fill up his ears with a shower's roar, then lie down.

But he couldn't do it. He had to move forward.

The highway unspooled under starlight. Dashes marked his lane. Bone-white, they sailed past his high beams with the regularity of a metronome. Sleep's tease was strong, but he felt a tug stronger than sleep, stronger than dread or regret, than death. An invisible thread ran over mountains, past rivers and roads, up his bumper and right through the windshield. The thread caught his throat and bound, at the other end, his boy's heart. A word, *the* word, for this—it wasn't Dan's, didn't belong to him.

And so he imagined the pull as the work of water. Blue, the

view from Jack's window, the Pacific a rectangle over the kitchen sink. It was water called him west—the waiting coast, the cold and silver crash of waves.

* * *

La Jolla was a city on a cliff, dips and hills, a trapeze flung above the bay. Trees were here, and wealth. Couples in matching sweaters walked well-groomed dogs through the crosswalks. Children in sunglasses and name-brand clothes talked into cell phones. Storefronts advertised merchandise that, on sale, cost a month of Dan's income.

He'd been a day and a night without sleep. All night he'd driven, stopping three times only. He'd gotten to where he could use the bathroom, buy food, and pump gas in five minutes. The whole way, he'd pushed the speed limit. He hadn't slowed down, not once, not even for the armadillo he'd sent spinning over the road like a top. Now, his head swam and his eyes, when he blinked, felt sand-filled and asymmetrical, his skull small.

He sat behind the wheel of the car on the street before a row of blue mailboxes. A box on one end held a quiet surprise: a maiden name—his wife's. He didn't know when Jack had changed his name or if it was official. He wondered which name the boy would be buried with, then shook this off. Some things were worth worrying about. His name wasn't one.

Beyond the sidewalk and up a hill, the building waited. Houses rose on either side, so close a man might stand between, reach out, and touch two walls. The buildings, a street's worth, stood white and red, stucco and brick, brightly shuttered, with Spanish tile on top. The sun, just up, painted the clay roofs pink.

For too long, he'd sat, trying to catch his breath. Now he stood and swung the car door shut. No matter what awaited him, no matter what looked back at him from the bed, he would smile. That was the first thing he would do. He would smile, and he

would not cry. He would kneel, and, if Jack let him, he'd open his arms.

Jack's door hung orange inside the white frame. A brass ring marked its middle. It was only a staircase away.

Dispensation. Was that the word for what he wanted?

And how long would he wait before he begged?

He'd tried this once before. Long ago, after he'd served his time and sobered, he'd driven to Baton Rouge but been turned away at the door. He'd stood a long time at that door too, stood, then knocked, then waited, then knocked again, only for the door to open to Lynn's scowling face. He'd never learned whether Jack knew he'd come.

This door, though, when he moved to knock, stood ajar. Dan leaned and the door opened. Inside, a kettle's curve on the stove, dishes overflowing the kitchen sink, and, rolled at the wrist, a single latex glove. Thumb tucked under, fingers splayed, it hugged the floor like shed skin. Against the linoleum, two fingers gleamed red up to the knuckle.

Beyond the kitchen was the main room. Against one wall stood an enormous saltwater aquarium, and, circling inside, a pair of striped, spine-covered fish. Their bodies glimmered brown and white in the yellow glow of the tank light, their fins silk-webbed and see-through.

The first step, once he took it, set him moving fast. He moved through the kitchen and past the room with the fish, down a hallway and toward the two bedroom doors. One door stood open, the room a study. The walls were bookcases, the shelves spilling over into piles on the floor. Among the mounds was wedged a blue blow-up mattress, its black tail plugged into a pump the size of a cinder block. A duffel bag yawned at the foot of the bed, a red sock sprung like a tongue between unzipped teeth.

The other door was shut. He remembered to breathe. He pressed his palm to the wood, hesitant, as though to feel for fire inside. He waited.

And pushed the door open to an empty bed, the sheets strangled into a rope that stretched to the door. Beside the bed stood an IV stand and a cluster of gray-faced, many-buttoned machines. Wires and tubes hung disconnected along the floor. In one corner, a wheelchair lay on its side.

He felt a need, just then, to go to the chair, to right it, as though it lived, as though to lift the thing might save its life. The chair, once he had hold of it, was heavy. He tipped it up, tried to make it roll, but someone had set the brake. The floor's planks pushed back at the wheels with a sneaker's squeak.

He moved to the bed. He sat, ran his hand over the mattress. Stains the shapes of continents stared back through the scrim of the fitted sheet. His knees found his chin. His head found the pillow. It was soft, and he took one corner into his mouth. He tasted salt. He pulled the pillow over his head.

He wasn't sure how long he slept before a door's slam echoed down the hall. From beneath the pillow, he could see a sliver of floor, then shoes in the doorway. They were red with white laces, a white cap on each toe, the kind he'd worn as a kid, played basketball in. He didn't have to look up to know whose shoes.

"Don't say I almost made it," Dan said.

Marcus said nothing. The feet were planted far apart.

"Just, please don't tell me how close I was."

"He died last night," Marcus said. "You weren't even close."

* * *

In the kitchen, Marcus boiled water. He was tall, thin and tan, his hair dark, cropped close along the sides of his head. His sideburns touched his jaw's hinges, and his face wore stubble's mossy mask. Black crescents cradled his sockets like the bottom halves of punched eyes.

At the kettle's whistle, Marcus tipped the water into a glass. The glass was beaker-shaped and tapered at the mouth like a vase. Coffee grounds waited at the bottom. The stream hit the grounds,

swirled, and steamed. Together, they made mud, and the mud rose, bubbling. Marcus fastened a lid to the lip of the glass, and the two of them watched the brown water. In the other room, the fish tank bubbler hummed. Dan imagined the fishes' gill plates going in and out. Then Marcus pushed a kind of plunger into the mix, and a silver disc separated the grounds from what had been brewed.

It was a miracle, a horror—the world, and his son gone, blinked from existence. How a body, breathing, turned to lungs. He pictured them, sticky, deflated, gray balloons trampled into a wet sidewalk. And still the march of days, still sunrise and weather and water for coffee. Jack dead, and still beans would be dried and crushed, strained through water, and men and women would raise their mugs and read the day's news and make grocery lists and worry over coupons and wonder whether their tires were in need of rotation.

Marcus was talking oxygen, how everyone went by oxygen in the end. Oxygen or water, and, anyway, water *was* one part oxygen. Too little, too much, these were what killed you. You suffocated or swelled, dehydrated or drowned. Life was balance—imbalance, death.

Proportion. Equilibrium. A needle in the arm had kept water in Jack's body. A needle in the lung had kept it out. In this way, they'd kept Jack alive. In the end, his lungs had filled up faster than they could be emptied out.

Marcus poured coffee into cups and joined Dan at the kitchen table. He looked calm, and Dan couldn't stand it, how matter-of-fact he acted, as though every day your lover died and you sat and sipped coffee across the table from his father. Marcus watched the table, and Dan watched Marcus, wanting to throttle the calm from him.

"You have it too?" Dan asked.

Marcus started. Then, his face collapsed into something approaching amusement.

"Not all of us live with AIDS, Mr. Lawson," he said. "Some do. Some live with HIV. But most of us just . . . live."

"I only thought—the two of you."

"Friends," Marcus said. "It only seems like more because I was here at the end."

Dan thought of breaking the man in half. What held him back was *need*. Marcus alone knew Jack's final hours, his words, the last look on his face.

"Did Jack—"

"—say anything?" Marcus laughed. He seemed to Dan a man who, in this life, had enjoyed very little power, a man who now relished his dominion over the last half day and what had gone on in it. Marcus was smiling into his cup, but, when his eyes lifted, his expression was humorless.

"You want me to tell you he had some special shit saved up just for you, but no such luck." Marcus spun his mug in his hands. The steam rose in ribbons. "The magic words were supposed to be yours. *Your* words. Not his. This was your last chance, and, let's face it, you blew it."

Dan brought his mug to his mouth. The rim was chipped, the coffee strong.

"How much did my son tell you?"

"Enough for me to know what you were to him."

"And what was that?"

"A curiosity," Marcus said. "Last century's last holdout."

The mug was hot in his hands, but Dan would not put it down.

"I was trying to get used to the idea," he said.

"*Try harder.* The country's growing up. Before long, no one will be left, no one to accommodate what you call *love*."

Dan stood and launched his cup across the room. It hit and exploded. Coffee streaked the wall.

He moved to the door. One boot was on the stoop before Marcus's voice reached him.

"Squirrels," he said. "I don't know if that means anything to you, but, at the end, it's all he talked about. Squirrels in the bed. Squirrels running up the walls."

"Squirrels," Dan said. He gripped the doorframe to keep steady. His knees locked.

"The morphine," Marcus said. "That's probably all it was."

"Morphine," Dan said.

Marcus's shoulders heaved. His head dropped. His brow touched the table.

Dan winced. The fish was there again, set loose in his gut, writhing, careening to get out. He stepped inside.

Beneath the kitchen sink, he found a roll of paper towels. He wet one. He wiped clean the spot on the wall, then picked up the china fragments from the floor. He moved to the kitchen sink. He stacked the dishes, the trays, the pans caked with burnt food, all of it, onto the counter. He let the sink fill with soapy water and dropped the dishes in. And then—because what else could he do?—he began to scrub.

* * *

The water, when his feet finally found it, was cold. His socks were balled up in his boots, his boots lassoed by their laces and slung over one shoulder. The cold climbed his legs, and he walked until the water reached his knees.

He had worked steadily for an hour. When the kitchen was clean, he'd stepped outside, his stomach still writhing. He could see the beach, and he walked to it.

He'd left without a word, Marcus collapsed at the table, a sentry over the dead.

Dan pushed through water, following the shoreline. The beach was not like the beach back home. The gulf ran to sand, but, here, the shore was crowded with stones, outcroppings of rock and reef. He walked until he hit a rock wall, the water too deep to go

around. Steps were carved into stone, and he followed them to a ledge where he found megaphones and signs and people gathered.

"Save the seals," one woman shouted. And a man: "Let them live in peace."

Dan pressed through the people, past a brass plaque that announced his arrival at THE CHILDREN'S POOL, to an iron banister skirting the ledge. The towering rock on which he stood reached into the ocean where it met a concrete wall, the wall an arm, the arm beckoning water into bay. Below, a sandy cove lay carpeted with seals.

The seals numbered fifty. He counted them, then he counted them again. Half of the seals dozed. The others rubbed their sides and snouts with flippers or raised their heads to watch the waves. Their hides were white and black and brown, cloudy, the colors running together. Just like marble. Just like Jack had said. They were small, the seals, each no bigger than a sleeping child, and their bodies threw long shadows over the sand. A boy and girl, teenagers, sat, legs crossed, not far from the seals and holding hands.

A staircase traced the ledge and wound down to the cove, but, at the first step, a woman blocked his way. The woman wore a T-shirt, white with a blue seal silhouette across the chest.

"What's the cost?" he said.

The woman laughed, and he saw all of her fillings.

"Only your soul," she said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm not charging admission," she said. "I'm telling you why you need to leave the seals alone." Her hair was long, held back in a thick braid that swung when she spoke. "One foot on that beach, and you break nature's contract."

Dan looked down. Beyond the seals, following the wall, footprints crossed and recrossed the beach, the autograph of an impossible dance.

"We need to preserve nature's delicate balance," she said.

He hadn't meant to make her flinch, but now Dan found his hand on the woman's shoulder. He squeezed the shoulder gently, then brought the hand to his side.

"Sweetheart," he said. "Nature has no balance. You can stand here all day. You can keep as many people off that beach as you want, but, one way or another, those seals, all of them, are going to die. You and I are going to die. Because, you know what? You know what nature is?"

The shake of her head was so slight, the braid hung still.

"Nature is a fucking monster."

The woman hugged her chest. She stepped aside, and Dan made his way down the stairs and onto the beach. The couple holding hands looked up, then returned their attention to the seals. Twenty yards away, the animals yawned and turned in the sand. One of the largest watched the sky, its head bobbing, as though forcing something down its throat.

Jack had said how sometimes seals swallowed stones. "For ballast," he said. "The way a diver wears a belt to keep him down." Weight controlled a dive. Men weighted belts with lead. Seals ate stones. In this way, buoyed otherwise by fat or air, both animals sank.

Dan imagined filling up his gut. He'd start small, grains of sand, pebbles polished ocean-smooth, before he wore his teeth down chewing rocks. He'd obliterate the interloper, fill himself so full of stones the fish inside him would have no place to swim, then he'd swallow more—just watch, just wait and see—more and more, enough to grind the motherfucker out of existence. Then no more churn, no fiery, twisting thing.

He watched the seals, the couple on the beach. The girl stood, and the boy brushed sand from her pants. Then the boy stood, and, hand in hand, they climbed the stairs.

Dan watched the seals awhile longer, then looked past them to

where the water met the sky. A line, pencil-thin, marked the place planes touched, so faint it almost wasn't a line at all. The end, the way he saw it, would be when that line lifted and the two halves crashed, a cosmic collapse. It would come, the end, when blue met blue.